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Posted 9/29/2005 8:06 PM

Campaign tries to stoke German pride

By David Crossland Special for, USA TODAY

BERLIN — Germans' sagging national pride and collective sense of gloom have reached critical levels, the country's top media companies say. So they have decided to do something about it.



Double-digit unemployment, meager economic growth and a political stalemate have brought down the morale of Germans.

AP

Publishing giant Bertelsmann and 23 other companies — including publisher Axel Springer, newspaper *Der Spiegel* and broadcaster RTL Germany — have kicked off a four-month, \$36 million campaign to lift German spirits.

Using the slogan "You are Germany," the national pep talk began Monday with an emotional two-minute TV ad featuring celebrities such as figure-skating champion Katarina Witt and the theme song from the movie *Forrest Gump*.

"You are the miracle of Germany," the celebrities tell their countrymen in the ad. "A butterfly can unleash a typhoon. The air moved by the flap of its wings can uproot trees a few kilometers away. Just as a breath of air can become a storm, your deeds can have an effect."

The spot ran simultaneously on Germany's 10 main TV channels.

Initiated by Bertelsmann, which owns U.S. publisher Random House, the campaign also will appear in movie theaters and in newspapers. Its messages will appear on billboards and on the "You are Germany" campaign's website, www.du-bist-deutschland.de.

The effort to improve Germany's mood comes at a critical time. Double-digit unemployment and meager economic growth have been compounded by a political stalemate resulting from the muddled outcome of national elections Sept. 18.

The campaign's aim: to create a "mood of optimism," organizer Bernd Bauer says. "We alone can't change the country, but we may be able to initiate change, which then needs to be taken up by ordinary people, companies and organizations."

About 17 million people saw the TV spot Monday night, the campaign's press office said in a statement.

Skeptical reactions

"It's a rather desperate attempt to generate enthusiasm," says Richard Schuetze, 50, a business consultant living in Berlin.

Benno Simmering, 27, a student from Berlin, says the project is a good idea but not what's needed. "I'm not sure what it's going to achieve," he says. "The only way you're going to change Germany's image of itself is if you get serious about economic reforms."

A survey this month showed that the economy, a great source of German pride for decades after World War II, has become its biggest source of angst. In the poll, conducted by an arm of insurer R+V Versicherung, 52% of Germans said they were "very afraid" of the future — up from 25% in 1991. Unemployment was among their biggest worries.

Germany's election Sept. 18 might have compounded those fears. Neither of Germany's two main candidates — Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder or opponent Angela Merkel — won enough support to form a government, and both have laid claim to the chancellorship.

Merkel based her bid for power on the message that Germany is in crisis and needs to radically change its welfare system.

German economic data make depressing reading:

- The jobless rate is stuck above 10%, more than twice the U.S. rate.
- Economic growth is projected to be less than 1% this year, among the slowest rates in Europe.
- Top companies, including engineering group Siemens, are relocating jobs to Eastern

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The use of an image campaign to rekindle German patriotism can be a touchy matter. "I think it's rubbish because it's nationalistic," says Robert Erlich, 28, an unemployed German.

Hitler rose to power by stoking nationalism, and Germans' national pride remains dampened by the crimes of the Nazis, says Manfred Schmidt, a professor of political science at Heidelberg University. That has not kept the campaign from using the image of physicist Albert Einstein, a Jew who fled Nazi persecution in 1933, in one of the ads.

'Take things into your own hands'

In addition to relying on inspirational music from *Forrest Gump*, the "You are Germany" campaign borrows from U.S. President John F. Kennedy's inaugural address in 1961, when he exhorted Americans to "ask not what your country can do for you."

The ads tell Germans, "Don't ask what others will do for you. You are the others."

"We're effectively telling people, 'Don't expect the politicians to get anything done. Try to take things into your own hands,'" says Oliver Voss, the project's creative director.

But self-reliance has not been the German way during the government-directed postwar period, Schmidt says.

"In Germany, you expect the political system and the economy to provide your (social and job) security," he says. In the USA and Britain, "you expect to gain security through your own initiative."

Part of the problem is German negativity, says filmmaker Konstantin Faigle, whose tongue-in-cheek documentary *The Great Depression* was released in theaters here this month. "It's got a lot to do with our history. This hesitancy and moaning have been passed on from generation to generation," Faigle says. "Before you do anything, you have to work out what happens if something goes wrong."

He adds, "We nurture our depression. We haven't managed to laugh at ourselves enough."

Soccer's World Cup, to be hosted by Germany next year, could lift spirits. However, more defeats like this month's 2-0 loss to Slovakia could plunge the country into even deeper gloom — one more possible bump on the road to happiness for Germans to ponder.

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